

Jonah 4:9-11

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/jonah/jonah-4/jonah-49-11/>

God asks Jonah if it is proper to be angry over a plant. Jonah affirms he has every reason to be angry, even to death. God rebukes him for having more sympathy for a plant he neither planted nor cultivated than for the souls of the Ninevites.

God commissioned a plant to grow over Jonah's head to provide extra shade for him. Jonah was happy that he stayed away from the intense heat. But when God caused a worm to kill the plant, leaving Jonah in the heat, the prophet wished he were dead (v. 8). God is creating an object lesson for Jonah. Now the LORD intervened with a question. He *said to Jonah, Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?*

It is worth noting here that God is speaking directly to Jonah, and it does not seem abnormal to Jonah. It seems this is considered ordinary and typical for Jonah. For New Testament believers, it is worth considering that the Holy Spirit of God dwells within us, and is always speaking (Romans 8:14-16). Therefore, we can take instruction for ourselves from this interaction between God and Jonah, where God exhorts Jonah to trust that He knows what is best, and to choose a perspective that is true, a perspective from God's point of view.

Jonah was *angry* because God spared the Ninevites. God asked him if it was appropriate for him to be angry (4:3). In doing so, God was asking Jonah to choose a different perspective, a perspective from God's point of view, which is a true perspective. Then, the prophet did not provide an answer to God's question. Now again, God asked a similar question, which anticipates a negative response. However, Jonah arrogantly responded affirmatively, saying, *I have good reason to be angry, even to death.*

Having heard Jonah's answer, the LORD seized the opportunity to show him the application of the object lessons. He said, *You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow.* The word for *compassion* often refers to the emotion of sympathy that someone manifests toward someone else. Sometimes, however, the word describes someone's sympathy for something, such as material possessions (Genesis 45:20).

The LORD used the term *compassion* to reveal Jonah's divided heart. Jonah had no reason to be *angry* about the loss of the *plant* because he did nothing to produce it, nothing to grow it, and nothing to save it. God caused the *plant* to grow to provide extra shade for Jonah. It was a gift given by God. By God's power, the *plant came up overnight and perished overnight.* Therefore, the prophet had no share in it and had no right to be *angry* about it. God, not Jonah, commissioned the plant to grow and then caused it to dry out.

A proper perspective would have been to express gratitude for the time Jonah enjoyed the gift God gave. Instead, Jonah has become entitled, and now expresses anger that his new expectation of comfortable circumstances is not being met.

The LORD then gives Jonah the object lesson. He compared the *plant* to Nineveh as He confronted *Jonah* with a penetrating question. He said, *Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?* The answer to the question is “Yes.” If Jonah could feel sympathy for the loss of a *plant* he did not cultivate, how much more should God show sympathy for *Nineveh*, a *city* filled with people created in His image?

The *city* called *Nineveh* was the capital of the mighty empire of Assyria. It was on the eastern bank of the Tigris River. Today *Nineveh* is Tell Kuyunjik, located on the Tigris River some six hundred miles upriver from the Persian Gulf in northern Iraq, roughly 300 miles from Babylon.

God told *Jonah* that *Nineveh* was a *great city*. According to ancient Near Eastern standards, *Nineveh* was a fabulous city. To confirm the size of *Nineveh* and its need for divine *compassion*, God said *there were more than 120,000 persons in it who did not know the difference between their right and their left hand*.

This could mean that there was a total population of *120,000* people, and they were living in moral ignorance. Though they were responsible for their wicked actions, they did not have God’s special revelation by which they could determine His will. That is why God sent *Jonah* there to proclaim His will so that they could either repent or else fall under God’s judgment.

However, given that *Nineveh* was the capital of the great Assyrian empire, and it took three days to walk through (*Jonah* 3:3), it seems more likely that God is saying here that there are *120,000* people in *Nineveh* that are children who are so young they do not know the difference between their right and left hands. This shows the intimate knowledge God had of the pagan city, and His care for innocent life.

In addition to the innocent children living in *Nineveh*, there were also *many animals*. If *Jonah* could not have compassion on the adults who might take up arms against Israel, could he at least have compassion on the innocent children and the animals? God had compassion on all the people, He is using an object lesson here to say “You have compassion on a plant, could you not have compassion on children and animals?” God appears to be attempting to help *Jonah* see the needs of others rather than just focusing upon himself.

God desired to send His prophet to *Nineveh* to reveal His will to the people so that they would not perish. For this reason, God reprimanded *Jonah* for having more concern for the shading *plant* than for the souls of the *Ninevites*, particularly the innocent children and animals.

The book of *Jonah* ends abruptly with God’s question to *Jonah*, indicating that the prophet got the point. We can infer *Jonah* understood by the fact that this book was written—there does not seem to be any witness that could write this book other than *Jonah* himself. However, *Jonah* does not write his reaction. Perhaps this is because *Jonah* desires the reader to place themselves in his shoes, and ask themselves the same question: “Do I have compassion on others, particularly those who are innocent?” The New Testament warns believers not to allow the experience of wickedness let their love grow cold (*Matthew* 24:12-13; *Revelation* 2:4-5). This experience with

Jonah allows us to consider our own hearts, and choose a perspective that loves others, regardless of their behavior.

God used the *plant* as an object lesson to correct Jonah's lack of compassion for Nineveh. In doing so, He also revealed His love and compassion for all nations. Jesus died for the entire sins of the world (John 3:16; Colossians 2:14). Although Nineveh was a pagan nation, God did not want the people to perish in their sins. So, He sent the prophet Jonah there to reveal His will, and offer them an opportunity to repent. When the prophet warned the people of God's judgment, they turned from their wicked ways. God had mercy on them because He is "gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness" (Jonah 4:2). May all who read this book experience God's gracious love and compassion, like *Jonah* and the Ninevites did!

Biblical Text

⁹ Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."¹⁰ Then the Lord said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. ¹¹ Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?